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The Disruptive Potential of Magic: Economic Worldbuilding and Critical Consciousness in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction

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Abstract

Fantasy realms are often sites of economic prosperity. Magic cultivates abundance by severing the explicit relationship between labour and capital, imbuing these fictional spaces with a disruptive potential that can be used to critique existing economic orders. This paper examines how economic worldbuilding in young adult fantasy texts enables the conscientisation of young readers. Guided by Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientização* or critical consciousness, a comparative analysis of the *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997-2007) and *Scholomance* (Novik 2020-2022) series exposes how magical economies can replicate or disrupt inequality. This article argues that, as the cost-of-living crisis continues and global financial systems become increasingly uncertain, it is pertinent to understand how young people are discouraged or empowered to critique economic ideologies in fictional spaces.

Keywords: young adult fiction, fantasy, Paulo Freire, conscientisation, economic justice

Introduction

Fantasy realms are often sites of economic prosperity. The market squares are bustling, the feasts are lavish, and the glittering coinage is plentiful. Magic systems can cultivate this abundance by severing the explicit relationship between labour and capital – magical practitioners can perform all sorts of tasks, from mundane drudgeries to great feats, with the right incantation, transfiguration, or potion. This more nebulous correlation of labour and

capital imbues magical economies with a disruptive potential. Authors of young adult (YA) fantasy fiction can embrace or dismiss this potential to condone, contravene, or outright contradict existing economic systems. Through a comparative analysis of two YA fantasy fiction series, this paper examines how economic worldbuilding in fantasy fiction can inhibit or promote the critical consciousness of young readers. Paulo Freire defines critical consciousness, translated from the Portuguese *conscientização*, as the ability to understand and dismantle oppressive structures. It is an interventionist stance that empowers citizens to recognise injustice, exercise agency, and enact social change. Where the economic worldbuilding of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) invites revelry in consumption and blindness to economic injustice, Naomi Novik's *Scholomance* (2020-2022) foregrounds the inequality and suffering caused by unregulated free markets and supports conscientisation. As the cost-of-living crisis (CLC) continues and global financial systems become increasingly uncertain, it is pertinent to understand how young people are discouraged or empowered to critically engage with economic ideologies.

Economic Upheaval, Contemporary Crises and Class Readings of YA Fiction

The growth of global economic inequality in recent years has increasingly exposed young people to financial hardship. In Australia, for example, wealth distribution is at its most unequal since 1950 (Miller and Dixie 22). While the most affluent quartile of Australians now holds over half of the total household wealth, the poorest quartile holds less than 1% (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Over half of Australians currently report difficulty affording necessities such as food, health care, and housing (Black et al.) and around 1 in 6 Australian children live in poverty (United Nations Children's Fund). The Australian CLC mirrors global patterns of worsening economic inequality. In the United Kingdom, where J. K. Rowling resides, 5.06 million children under sixteen are members of relative or absolute low-income families, a number that has been on the rise for the last three years (Department for Work and Pensions).

Naomi Novik comes from the United States of America, where children represent the largest group of people living below the poverty line (Children's Defense Fund). Experiencing deprivation in early life can have long-term negative impacts (Saunders et al.). Young people living in poverty are more likely to be subjected to "harsh physical and social environments" and to experience poorer developmental outcomes across cognition, socio-emotional skills, and health (Warren 4). They are also more likely to experience poorer mental health (Golberstein et al.). It is clear that economic upheavals can bring on a range of personal difficulties for adolescents. So how does the fiction aimed at this demographic grapple with the reality of living through such crises?

Fictional worlds offer an imaginative space to explore such uncertainty. Social disruptions caused by a range of factors, including political unrest and climate change, have been shown to negatively impact youth wellbeing (Anderson et al.; Caporino et al.). YA fiction can be a safe medium to negotiate the anxieties that crises provoke and to consider affirmative action for re-establishing stability. Chin Ee Loh contends that, in this way, texts "serve as points of entry and discursive spaces for conversations about self and world" (293). Following the September 11 attacks there was a surge in the publication of dystopian YA fiction, including the popular series *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *Divergent* by Veronica Roth. This was a trend Melissa Ames attributes to the "safe space" the subgenre gave to explore destabilised systems (7). She further posits that the consideration of societal issues in dystopian YA fiction can act as a "catalyst to incite real action" (17). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has triggered a proliferation of YA fiction examining the African American experience, including Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Kekla Magoon's *Light It Up* (Mootz). Through their representation of racial discrimination, systemic inequality, and police brutality, these texts "insist on the humanity of black lives" and encourage empathetic engagement with anti-racist movements (Rix). The climate emergency has inspired the cli-fi genre, including YA fiction titles such as Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* and Emmi Itäranta's

Memory of Water. Jennifer Harrison observes that cli-fi YA fiction texts both explore the devastating consequences of environmental mismanagement and instruct readers on ways this damage "might be managed or mitigated by present or future action" (105). Economic upheavals are another social disruption informing the themes of YA fiction, though scholarship in this area is limited.

Over thirty years ago Ian Wojcik-Andrews noted a "surprising" absence of critique of economic themes in YA fiction (114). Since then, there have only been class analyses of a small range of successful YA fiction series, including Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (Simmons), Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (Lindén), and Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* (Glenn). Some scholars have addressed the economic ideologies of YA fiction, predominantly arguing that the genre reinforces restrictive class boundaries. Roberta Seelinger Trites claims that YA fiction teaches adolescents "their place in the power structure" (x). Jonathan Alexander similarly asserts that the genre ensures that "citizens are trained in specific literacies to maintain the flow of resources or the maximisation of profits" (18). Arguably, these positions underestimate the transgressive possibilities of YA fiction. Ashely S. Boyd and Janine J. Darrah (2019) contend that YA fiction inspires civic engagement by heavily featuring social justice issues. Steven Wolk similarly suggests that the genre promotes social responsibility through the posing of "moral and ethical quandaries" (667). This optimistic perspective on class representation in YA fiction more accurately reflects the subversive potential of the genre and better recognises the agency and social imagination of its young readers.

The theoretical approach of this article aligns with this more radical approach, guided primarily by the work of neo-Marxist Paulo Freire. A "renaissance" of Marxist theory has taken place since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the subsequent destabilisation of global markets (Lye and Nealon 9). Wendy Brown contends that this shift is a response to nation-states failing to guarantee citizen's "security, protection, or even survival" through neoliberal policies, which remake "the human being as human capital" (37; 34). For Freire, this

massification strips individuals of the capacity to intervene in social reality. To counter this dehumanisation, he argued that people must progress towards critical consciousness. Conscientisation, also known as integration, occurs when an individual gains awareness of the systemic roots of their social, political, and economic oppression and personally engages in the transformation of these systems. This process is anchored in an ongoing dialogue with others and the world.

Fiction can cultivate this dialogue. Indeed, Christa de Brun identifies literature as a crucial tool to "facilitate critical consciousness" (4). Speculative fictions, like fantasy, particularly lend themselves to the exploration of utopian ideals or dystopian warnings. As Rosemary Jackson explains, fantasy fiction eludes the "conventions and restraints of more realistic texts" (1). Fantasy authors are liberated by the imaginative potential of the genre. Helen Young calls this "rhetorical distance", which has the capacity "to make us look at our world in new ways, to reconsider attitudes and assumptions" (2). The reader is alerted to the shared, malleable nature of their social reality, seeing it anew as a "construct amenable to revision" (Saler 7). The YA fantasy fiction subgenre melds this approach with the exploration of YA themes, including identity, relationships, and change (Falconer 89). This combination opens up a world of possibilities for the conscientisation of adolescent readers. Research already suggests a link between reading fiction and the development of one's moral imagination – engaging with narratives can stimulate ethical reflection (Sklar), inform understandings of justice (Appel), and inspire deeper moral self-knowledge (Hakemulder). According to Freire, these are the virtues of a literate and engaged public, one with a "free and creative consciousness" (22). This article considers how magical economies ignore or invite opportunities for this conscientisation through the exploration of two fictional worlds.

Magical Economic Worldbuilding as Ideology

Magical economies are opportunities for endless invention. After all, the flow of wealth and resources in a fantasy realm is not necessarily constrained by the practicalities of tax credits, trade deals, or tariffs. Establishing the parameters of these systems is an act of worldbuilding. Miriam Soltan articulates worldbuilding as a "cyclical, expansive, and aggregative" process that provides framing and context for narratives (551). Effective worldbuilding emerges from the gradual and coherent accumulation of textual detail and anchors narratives in a time and place. Worldbuilding can account for a truly momentous range of topics. Authors specify cultural details like dress, food, and manners and prescribe new terms for geography, religion, physics – the possibilities are literally endless. Economic worldbuilding dictates the production and consumption of resources in a fictional world. Fantasy authors can build magical economies that mirror or refute the established norms of the real world.

The ways that a magical economy aligns with, or diverges from, existing economic structures exposes a set of economic values and beliefs – that is, an economic ideology. The Marxist Antonio Gramsci argued that this ideology is imposed by the dominant class and enforces a "tightly woven social and cultural fabric" designed in their interest (Castle 110). The didacticism of children's literature has often replicated dominant economic ideologies. Elizabeth Bullen notes that contemporary publications in the genre demonstrate a "continued promotion of middle-class values" (52). YA fiction, by contrast, is often a site of "subversive elements" (Musgrave xii). This disruptive tone, combined with an inclination towards social, political, and economic issues, makes the YA fantasy fiction subgenre a rich space for the development of Freire's critical consciousness. Freire argued that successful conscientisation or integration relies on a subject's critical engagement with economic ideologies. Where conscientisation fails, a person becomes an object guided by an economic ideology imposed by external authorities. This is known as adaption. The interrogation of magical economies exposes the ways that authors encourage adaption by replicating inequitable economic ideology or integration by critiquing economic injustice.

Rowling's *Harry Potter* is the pre-eminent fantasy saga of modern times and features a magical economy dominated by consumption, labour exploitation, and wealth inequality. The series, consisting of seven titles published between 1997 and 2007, is the bestselling in history and has had a monumental impact on the cultural zeitgeist. Rebekah Fitzsimmons reflects that Rowling "captured the imagination of an entire generation" (102). The story follows Harry as he flees his childhood home, where he is denied suitable clothing, sufficient meals, and hygienic accommodation, to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Here he inherits his parents' significant wealth and assimilates into the prosperous wizarding community. The success of the series paralleled a decade of relative global economic stability (the last instalment narrowly preceded the GFC). Karin E. Westman notes that Rowling's world mirrored the "late capitalist, global consumer culture" of this period (306). Both Harry's escape from poverty and the lavish extravagance of the wizarding world may have been products of escapist fantasy for Rowling, who experienced bouts of unemployment and homelessness prior to the publication of her first novel. Her transformation into one of Britain's wealthiest individuals is a well-referenced rags-to-riches narrative. This is a romanticised archetype that Rowling herself admonishes. She argues that poverty "is not an ennobling experience … it means a thousand petty humiliations and hardships" ("Fringe Benefits"). It is noteworthy then that inequality thrives in Rowling's wizarding world.

Rowling's fantasy realm fosters adaption by replicating the economic injustices of unregulated capitalism. Witches and wizards use magic as an almost limitless resource. Demanding or impossible tasks are practically effortless – wands can be absentmindedly "waved" to summon chairs (*Order of the Phoenix* 469), "flicked" to conjure water (*Half-Blood Prince* 355), and "jabbed" to set a table (*Goblet of Fire* 59). Most needs can be met by using spells, charms, or potions. Healers "can mend bones in a second" and growing them is only a marginally more difficult matter (*Chamber of Secrets* 174). A "shabby" tent can contain a "three-room flat, complete with bathroom and kitchen" (*Goblet of Fire* 79-80). The minimal

labour required to secure goods and perform services in the wizarding world supports a thriving market economy. Trade hubs are lavish cornucopias, with "windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon" (*Philosopher's Stone* 72). These spaces offer enticing sensory experiences from the "jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders" (80) of the Apothecary to the "creamy chunks of nougat" and "fat, honey-coloured toffees" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 197) of Honeydukes sweet shop. Readers of *Harry Potter* are encouraged to revel in consumption.

While this unfettered abundance is accessible for some witches and wizards, scarcity remains a burden, and the class divide is prominent. Harry's best friend Ronald Weasley comes from a family that is "extremely poor" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 9). He has a wand that is "chipped in places" (*Philosopher's Stone* 105), a pet rat that is "second-hand … and a bit battered" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 58), and dress robes with a "mouldy-looking lace frill" (*Goblet of Fire* 155). This poverty is attributed to the Weasley family having "more children than they can afford" (*Philosopher's Stone* 108). This is puzzling, as the logic of Rowling's magical economy dictates that offspring are a source of further magic (and thus further labour). Without a clearly identifiable cause, the extreme wealth disparity of Rowling's magical economy is naturalised. Readers of *Harry Potter* come to understand that poor wizards are poor because they are poor, and wealthy wizards are wealthy because they are wealthy. Rowling encourages adaption by confirming the steep wealth disparities that often occur under unregulated capitalist systems.

Naomi Novik's *Scholomance* rejects this approach, identifying unfair economic structures as the root of social injustice and highlighting the importance of collective action for dismantling these oppressive systems. The trilogy, published between 2020 and 2022, mirrors the anxieties of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent decline of the global economy. The Scholomance is a brutal wizarding school that traps its students for the duration of their education, feeding on the most vulnerable and preserving the elite. While purporting to shelter pupils from wizard-hunting monsters known as maleficaria, the school is instead a kind of

"machinery" imbued with the "sense of something that can grind you up" (Messer). Novik's critical commentary on exploitative economic systems aligns with her keen interest in collectivism. She has contributed substantially to collectivist digital projects such as the Archive of Our Own (AO3) and the Organisation for Transformative Works (OTW). Sarah Skwire argues that Novik's *Scholomance* "mirrors contemporary understandings of privilege and inherited wealth" more accurately than *Harry Potter*. Indeed, Novik wrote the series partly as a response to Rowling. She became frustrated by what she perceived to be an inconsistent and illogical magic system, arguing that "when you start poking at" Rowling's economic worldbuilding it "doesn't work". Novik queries the implications of magic that "doesn't cost anything except the time it takes to learn it and cast it" (Robinson). She determined to build a completely different magical economy, one that exposes the harms of economic injustice.

The scarcity, hierarchy, and exploitation of Novik's economic worldbuilding promotes a critical perspective that enables integration. After all, the Scholomance is a ruthlessly unfair place. The school was created by enclaves to shelter children from maleficaria – the ravenous wizard-hunting monsters who particularly enjoy devouring "tender young wizards" (*Deadly Education* 18). Enclaves are magical fortresses that trade magical protections from maleficaria for the labour of independent wizards. These "indies" spend years toiling for meagre compensation to gain entry to the enclaves while enclavers live in luxury. Enrolment in the Scholomance is only offered to the desperate offspring of independent wizards so they might act as "cannon fodder, and human shields … and janitors and maids" while enclave students wield a disproportionate control of resources (183). The school is essentially a "pyramid scheme" that relies on those "on the bottom being eaten" (*Last Graduate* 44). Protagonist Galadriel "El" Higgins rails against this status quo, calling the Scholomance "a putrid balloon full of writhing malice" (*Golden Enclaves* 8). Her sarcastic and acerbic narration is a running diatribe that positions readers to detest the injustices of both the Scholomance and the enclave system.

The inequalities of this magical economy stem from the scarcity of magic. Magical practitioners must use energy to cast spells. This can be done in two ways. The legitimate form, *mana,* is either willingly given or gained through the performance of physical or mental labour – what is crucial is "how much effort it costs" (*Deadly Education* 58). Alternatively, practitioners can accrue the ill-gotten *malia,* often through theft. In this magic system, "you don't ever get anything … without paying for it" (121) since "the bill has to come due eventually" (19). The students of the Scholomance must constantly "barter" (55), "trade" (61), and "ration" (44) because any exchange of resources must be a matter of "equal return" (79). This, of course, is not the case for all Scholomance students. Enclavers can recruit other students to complete their labour, draw on collective sinks of *mana* through powersharers, and protect each other's interests while "loaded up with powerful artifacts and the best spells" (90-1). They accrue an abundance of assets while maintaining an ignorance of how the system maintains their privilege. Chloe, a member of the elite New York enclave, obliviously argues "we're all in here together. Everyone has the same chances" (109). This magical economy is a caricature of unregulated capitalism, complete with an underappreciated and overworked proletariat dominated by an ungrateful and pretentious elite. Here Novik explicitly critiques the wealth disparities and social inequalities caused by unregulated free markets.

The magical economies of YA fantasy fiction can encourage the adaption or integration of adolescent readers, depending on their scrutiny of economic injustice. In the world of *Harry Potter,* almost any need or want can be satisfied with the correct magic. Yet a scarcity with no identifiable source still stratifies the wizarding community. This liberates witches and wizards from the inconveniences of labour while obfuscating the causes of inequality, and allows the reader an unfettered enjoyment of consumerist excess without due consideration of those failed by an unequal economic system. For Freire, this ignorance causes adaption and renders citizens dehumanised and disempowered. Contrastingly, Novik represents inequitable economic systems as a social burden. Labour performed for others in the Scholomance is commodified

and has a recognised "fair market value" (*Golden Enclaves* 31). Most relationships are transactional, as El observes "you don't do anything for anyone without some kind of return" (*Last Graduate* 116). Scholomance pupils must exert themselves constantly to avoid becoming "the lowest hanging fruit on the vine" (*Deadly Education* 40). Those who cannot sustain this crushing pace either fall prey to exhaustion, maleficaria, or their peers. For Freire, these insights into the nature of inequality encourage integration, wherein citizens gain awareness of their oppression and transform into "an instrument of choice" (51). Ultimately, *Harry Potter* and *Scholomance* offer starkly different magical economies: where Rowling's magic is an almost infinite, readily accessible resource that invites adaption through the pleasures of consumption and ignorance of economic injustice, Novik's magic fosters integration by highlighting the dehumanisation of exploitative labour practices.

Heroes and Villains: Individuals or the System?

Fantasy is a genre fiction and is thus replete with genre expectations. Ria Cheyne notes that genre fictions carry a specific "codified affective system" built from tropes, character archetypes, and narrative arcs (16). When a reader picks up a fantasy novel, their expectations derive from this system. There is a potent potential to provoke deliberation by confirming or disrupting these expectations, particularly regarding social issues. Cheyne articulates this as the text's capacity to "work towards social justice by fostering readerly reflection" (19). When authors engage with fantasy genre expectations in this way, they have an opportunity to elicit reflexivity and support the conscientisation of their readers.

One such fantasy genre expectation dictates that a hero will overcome a villain in a triumph of social ideals over social ills. However, consistently representing individual actors as the determinants of peace or chaos obscures the role that collectives and systems play in maintaining cycles of privilege and inequality. Freire identifies that this kind of concealment is a characteristic of sectarianism. The sectarian understands the individual as "the proprietor of

history … its sole creator, and the one entitled to set the pace of its movement" (9). For a sectarian, the will of the masses is subjugated by the will of powerful individuals. People are "not supposed to think" as "someone else will think for them" (10). In a sectarian society, citizens are oblivious to those socially regulated myths under which they are "crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator" (5). The radical position opposes this disempowerment. Freire explains that radicals act collectively to eradicate inequality. In a radical society, citizens are encouraged to obtain critical consciousness and thus empowered, "they emerge. No longer mere spectators, they uncross their arms, renounce expectancy, and demand intervention" (11). When both individuals and structures are represented as potential contributors to injustice, literary works can more effectively empower citizens in developing critical consciousness.

Rowling's *Harry Potter* charts a narrative arc that identifies individuals as the sole cause and cure of social ills. This is especially evident in the narcissistic antagonist Voldemort, who is noted for "his pride, his belief in his own superiority, his determination to carve for himself a startling place in magical history" (*Half-Blood Prince* 504). Voldemort is intent on eliminating non-wizarding people from the magical community, allowing "only those of the true blood to remain" (*Deathly Hallows* 11). He aims to subjugate magical creatures, non-magical people known as "muggles", and witches and wizards with human heritage, disparagingly referred to as "mudbloods" (*Chamber of Secrets* 115). Voldemort's legacy of violence is so extreme that many insist on the sole use of his moniker, "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" (*Philosopher's Stone* 85). He gains popular support by pandering to existing prejudices, as Headmaster of Hogwarts Albus Dumbledore notes "wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long" (*Order of the Phoenix* 834). Though the bigotry that allows this ideology to thrive is identified as a broader social issue, it is Voldemort himself who sows social discord, and he is the one that must be eliminated for the wizarding community to progress.

Harry is Voldemort's elected rival, a boy who assumes the mantle of the Chosen One archetype in several senses. His father was part of an old, pureblood wizarding family and Harry inherits its corresponding wealth and status – his bank vault is filled with "mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze Knuts" (*Philosopher's Stone* 75). He is an adept wizard with a "pronounced aptitude" for Defence Against the Dark Arts (*Order of the Phoenix* 664) and a "natural" Quidditch player (*Philosopher's Stone* 151). He is renowned for thwarting Voldemort's rise as a child, becoming known as "The Boy Who Lived" (17). The lightening-shaped scar he receives in this encounter physically "marks" him as Voldemort's "equal" (*Half-Blood Prince* 512). These characteristics endow him with the resources to defeat Voldemort and while he is supported in this quest, it ultimately comes down to "just the two of them" (703). Harry insists on his fulfillment of this destiny, arguing "it's got to be like this. It's got to be me" (*Deathly Hallows* 737). Rowling's wizarding world is disrupted and restored by individuals alone.

In Novik's *Scholomance,* the ultimate evil is not embodied by individuals but by ineffective and exploitative institutions. This subversion of fantasy tropes begins with Novik's repudiation of the Chosen One archetype. Protagonist El Higgins is destined to become a villain, like "some monstrous butterfly hatching from a gigantic chrysalis of doom" (*Deadly Education* 53). She has a magical affinity for spells that "destroy cities or slaughter armies or torture people horribly" and is ostracised for these terrible gifts (*Last Graduate* 28). From this maligned position, she can observe the brutal cost of the Scholomance's protection. She laments "we have to pay … we pay with our work, and we pay with our misery and our terror" (*Deadly Education* 19) and condemns the ceaseless greed of the enclave system as that of a "vicious international corporation" (*Golden Enclaves* 76). She weaponises her malevolent powers, not for evil, but to facilitate the collective action required to bring about change. Under El's leadership the Scholomance students collaborate to survive their upcoming graduation, a typically deadly affair that eliminates up to three-quarters of every cohort. This is not an easy

process – it requires the reconciliation of dozens of factions, each with long histories of treacherous tactics and violence. When El's plan does come to fruition, "everyone was helping everyone else, saving everyone else" (*Last Graduate* 257). As a YA fantasy protagonist, El is vicious, unforgiving, and possessed of unparalleled dark powers. Her occupation of a narrative role typically reserved for a benevolent hero subverts the Chosen One archetype and refocuses the narrative on the failings of an inequitable system.

This irreverent approach to fantasy genre expectations extends to El's foil, the prodigious Orion Lake. Orion is initially understood to be a heroic monster hunter, described variously as a "magnificent hero" (*Deadly Education* 23), "the greatest hero in generations" (*Last Graduate* 158), and a "gleaming perfect hero" (*Golden Enclaves* 17). However, his brave feats conceal a sinister purpose. He is a maw-mouth, a monster of excessive consumption that kills by "eating you forever" (*Deadly Education* 128). Maw-mouths are created when a human sacrifice is buried at the heart of a prospective enclave, crushed beneath bricks of *mana* "into an endless hell" (*Golden Enclaves* 284). These creatures are then let loose to hunt and their victims, once consumed, live on inside them. In this way, enclaves are quite literally built on exploitation – both in the immediate act of murder and in the continued suffering of the maw-mouths' victims. Orion lives in ignorance of his purpose, but it eventually transforms him into a "horrible killing machine" (213). His pain and the pain of his victims originate with the callous actions of the enclave that created him. It requires the collective efforts of El and her Scholomance peers to rescue and redeem Orion. The complicity of the elite in this horrific system is again foregrounded as the true adversary of Novik's trilogy.

The fantasy genre expectation of a hero thwarting a villain fixates on the power of the individual to determine outcomes, concealing the systemic failures that allow the illegitimate cultivation of power and eliding the collective action required to achieve effective reformation. In Rowling's wizarding world, the hero is destined to vanquish a malevolent villain – where one man sows discord, another restores order. When Voldemort is vanquished, Harry alone is

identified as “the reason it was over at last … their leader and symbol, their saviour and their guide” (*Deathly Hallows* 744). This echoes the characteristics of Freire’s sectarianism by glorifying the individual and ascribing limited significance to the actions of the many witches and wizards who fought to banish Voldemort. In Novik’s trilogy, El facilitates collective action to renegotiate the terms of the system itself. Freire articulates this as a “subversive action”, a radical, group-based effort that destabilises hierarchical economic and political systems and enables people to reclaim agency, to become “authentic human beings” (16). The Scholomance students are multifaceted characters who eschew fantasy character archetypes and collaborate to expose the enclaves. While traditional fantasy narratives may be highly individualistic, Novik’s work shows that authors can effectively subvert convention to elevate collective action and encourage the development of critical consciousness.

The New Order as Possible Futures

In the denouement of a fantasy narrative, the hero typically establishes a new order. The continuities or changes they impose, be they subtle or radical, signal their desired direction for the fantasy world. This is a didactic plot structure, one which can implicitly or explicitly reveal an author’s desired direction for our world more broadly. Indeed, the YA fantasy fiction subgenre, with its “special mixture of subversiveness and didacticism” (Burton 30), often broaches complex social issues and then points to possible futures. For Freire, these futures can be characterised as submerged or emerged. The former is stratified and closed. It is a future that relies on a “predominantly emotional and uncritical” underclass subjugated by the elite (9). The latter is optimistic and requires an “awakening of popular consciousness” (11). This is a future that embraces society as “something unfinished, not as something inexorably given” and relies on the active participation of all citizens to sustain equality (11). The interrogation of a fantasy world’s new order exposes the ways that authors reproduce an imposed ideology to suggest a submerged future or facilitate critical consciousness to promote an emerged future.

Following the fulfillment of Harry's heroic quest to defeat Voldemort, a new order is established that mirrors the old. This was not an inevitable outcome of the Second Wizarding War that concludes the series, as the chaos of this conflict partially dismantles several inequitable wizarding institutions. The bank Gringotts and the Ministry of Magic are all partly destroyed during Voldemort's campaign for domination. Hogwarts itself is all but demolished. When the survivors of the Battle of Hogwarts gather, "nobody was sitting according to House anymore: all were jumbled together, teachers and pupils, ghosts and parents, centaurs and house-elves" (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 745). However, this disruption is quickly resolved through the restoration of the existing system. Hogwarts retains its divisive Houses, continuing to differentiate students according to supposedly innate characteristics. Corrupt institutions, including Gringotts, the newspaper *The Daily Prophet,* and the prison Azkaban*,* are preserved. The Ministry of Magic remains a rigid bureaucracy. Harry goes on to serve as the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, a role that some claim turns him into a "stone cold Ministry man" (Thorne et al. 36). This lack of reform condones an ideology that enabled the rise of a repressive, totalitarian movement. The enduring threat of this complacency is confirmed by Voldemort's re-emergence. His daughter, Delphini, strives to change the past and bring about a "return to pure and strong magic" through the resurrection of her father, admitting she intends to "follow the path" set by Voldemort (287). Harry returns to take on the heroic mantle once again. He laments "it has to be me" (282). Though Harry eventually neutralises Delphini, the narrative does not interrogate how these threats continue to eventuate or why one individual seemingly appointed by destiny must always act to protect the wizarding community. Rowling endorses the status quo through the new order that concludes *Harry Potter*, demonstrating a complicity with exploitative systems.

El's heroic quest in *Scholomance* is only complete when she has dismantled the existing order and offered the magical community an alternative that encourages social and economic justice. Her powers allow her to destroy maw-mouths, the nearly invincible species of

maleficaria born from the establishment of enclaves. When these monsters are eliminated, their corresponding enclaves disappear "into flaming ruin or out into the void" (Novik, *Golden Enclaves* 36). Rather than dismantling the enclave system in this brutal manner, El strives for cooperative reformation. She and her peers begin to build Golden Enclaves, *mana*-based establishments that do not require human sacrifice. However, they are not universally appealing, as they cannot create the "grand, dramatic" spaces of *malia*-based enclaves (57). Instead of "fairyland castles and skyscrapers", El can offer only "a few solid bunkrooms for kids to sleep in and a workroom or two" (93). Though this is the more ethical option, it is not a change the magical community readily embraces. El and a cohort of her Scholomance peers force a revolution by holding the elite to ransom, threatening to destroy those maw-mouths that hold up their institutions. It is only then that the enclaves and the Scholomance are overhauled. Access to the school is made completely equitable, accepting all children of both enclave and independent families. The *malia* that sustained the school, what El viscerally describes as the "horrible lie that lived down at the heart of it, the rotting flesh beneath our feet", is eradicated (401-2). It is replaced with *mana.* This is magic willingly sourced from wizards who no longer wish to support a violent, repressive system, one that exploits the disadvantaged and upholds intergenerational privilege. The new order that emerges from the efforts of El and her Scholomance cohort is an economically just system.

The new orders that are often established in the denouement of fantasy narratives can be suggestive of a submerged or emerged future. Adolescents might determine from reading *Harry Potter* that wealth inequality, prejudice, and corruption are inevitable, and the periodic actions of a privileged few is sufficient resistance to these systemic issues. This is a concerning conclusion from a series that has garnered so much attention from adolescent audiences. Barbara Foley observes that "many literary works aiming at critiques of oppression and inequality … do not themselves escape the snares of dominant ideology" (129). This is arguably the case for *Harry Potter*. Rowling's new order blindly replicates the flaws of the old system,

representing a failure of the disruptive momentum that had the potential to democratise the wizarding community. This is a tacit endorsement of an inequitable system and points to a submerged future. For Novik, the evil that haunts the wizarding community is this kind of indifference. When El and her Scholomance cohort expose the inequitable nature of the system, it can no longer be sustained and collapses. El could not have succeeded in this heroic quest alone. While she is imbued with extraordinary powers, her reformation of the enclave system is only possible with the cooperation of her peers. They establish a truly new order by modelling critical consciousness and pointing to an emerged future.

Future Directions

This study has had the scope to examine two series, one of which is the bestselling of all time and a cornerstone of what Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson term "the hypercanon" (ix). This is an exclusive selection of bestselling YA fiction books that dominate school curricula, the media, and scholarship. It is essential that more research considers texts outside of this commercially successful group. Fitzsimmons and Wilson emphasise that the enduring academic fixation on "blockbuster" titles has resulted in the exclusion of "many valuable and important perspectives and approaches" (ix). Scholarship should not be siloed in this way. Expanding textual considerations will better account for the genre's diverse and sizeable nature, particularly as sales of YA fiction continue to increase.

YA fiction has experienced the fastest sales growth of any genre in the last five years, with science fiction and fantasy representing over 20% of purchases (Curcic; op de Beeck). Online reading communities such as BookTok, BookTube, and Bookstagram are flourishing and YA fantasy fiction titles feature heavily among recommendations (Dezuanni et al.; Gong). Growing engagement with the genre owes much to online reading communities and further attention should be directed to the capacity of these digital spaces to drive youth engagement with economic-justice issues. Scholarship is already examining how these digital spaces can

help build critically conscious communities. Sara Elizabeth Jerasa argues that the BookTok community empowers users to "challenge the status quo and promote transformative advocacy for equitable representation in books and reading practices" (234). Alysia de Melo criticises the same platform for failing to promote marginalised voices, arguing that BookTok demonstrates a "lack of racial and sexual-orientation diversity" (10). Future research may help to clarify the role social media platforms can play in the conscientisation of young readers.

Lastly, a more intensive focus on class analysis in YA fiction is needed. To this end, Bullen encourages scholars to be "responsive to the changing class structures of the contemporary world" (52). This is pertinent advice. Class divides are widening, and income inequality is deepening the world over (Noonan). Young people must navigate these increasingly precarious economic circumstances. It is crucial then that that we gain a better awareness of how economic themes in YA fiction can inform and empower them. Could these themes further engagement with principles of economic justice? Could they promote advocacy for wealth equality, fairer labour practices, and stronger legal constraints on unregulated capitalism? Further scholarship would provide clearer insights.

Conclusion

Fantasy worlds exist in the liminal space between reality and imagination. Their economies are systems of infinite potential. Yet fantasy literature can expose readers to limiting economic ideologies. Rowling's *Harry Potter* depicts a consumerist society burdened by a scarcity that deprives only the vulnerable. Individuals alone shape the direction of society and their decisions lead to the replication of past failings. This kind of fictional reproduction of inequality is not a foregone conclusion. Novik's *Scholomance* identifies unfair economic structures as the root of social injustice and highlights the importance of collective action for dismantling these oppressive systems. As young people come to navigate an increasingly

uncertain global marketplace, it is crucial that they can critically engage with economic ideologies. YA fantasy fiction could have a role to play in this conscientisation.

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